

VZCZCXRO6734
PP RUEHBC RUEHDA RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHMOS
DE RUEHIHL #0026/01 0541636
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 231636Z FEB 06
FM REO HILLAH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0549
INFO RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0534
RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE
RUEHIHL/REO HILLAH 0596

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HILLAH 000026

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [PINR](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: THOUSANDS ACROSS SOUTH CENTRAL PROTEST MOSQUE BOMBING;
SADRISTS BLAME U.S., AL-SISTANI PREACHES CALM

HILLAH 00000026 001.2 OF 003

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION

¶1. (U) Summary: Iraqis across the South Central region took to the streets February 22, angrily protesting the bombing of the Al-Askariyah Mosque in Samarra. Reportedly spontaneous at first, the demonstrations were soon spurred on by mosque exhortations and organized by Shi'a government officials, political parties and militias. Sadrists blamed U.S. forces and Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad for the bombing, and rumors spread from Samarra to Najaf that U.S. forces were the culprits. Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani and other senior Najaf clerics declared a period of mourning and preached calm, Iraqi Police scrambled to maintain order and protect Sunni mosques, and the demonstrations reportedly remained mostly peaceful. Protesters attacked a Sunni mosque in Karbala and killed a Sunni in Al-Hillah. There were unconfirmed reports of the killing of another Sunni in Diwaniyah. Contacts reported that demonstrations would likely continue February 23. End summary.

NAJAF CLERICS CALL FOR CALM, ARMED SADRISTS ASSEMBLE

¶2. (SBU) By midday February 22, Najaf Iraqi Police (IP) Chief Abdul Abbas Mu'adal reported that "thousands" had already gathered in downtown Najaf for a demonstration set to begin at 3 p.m. and that the city was "boiling." The Provincial Council issued a statement denouncing "the crime" and declared a seven-day mourning period and the closure of government offices for three days. Local contacts reported angry crowds gathering around the Old City home of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, and mosques, ambulances, and cars with loudspeakers called for more people to gather near Sistani's home.

¶3. (SBU) According to press reports, after an afternoon meeting between senior Najaf clerics Sistani, Shaykh Ishaq Al-Fayadh, Shaykh Bashir Al-Najafi, and Sayid Mohammed Saeed Al-Hakim, Sistani and Al-Hakim each issued statements condemning the bombing and announcing a seven-day mourning period. Sistani instructed the people to remain calm, refrain from attacking Sunni holy places, and to demonstrate peacefully. Ammar Al-Hakim, the son of Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) leader Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim, led the demonstration in downtown Najaf. Rumors reported by Najaf contacts say that busloads of Mahdi Militia began traveling to Samarra, and that the U.S. is responsible for the attack on the Al-Askariyah Shrine. The rumor states that gold pieces of the shrine's dome were found on rooftops all over the city of Samarra, a level of destruction that could only have been accomplished by American munitions.

¶4. (SBU) Unarmed members of the Mahdi Militia blocked all roads leading into Najaf, and hundreds gathered outside Moqtada Al-Sadr's house. By evening, local staff reported that about 500

heavily armed Mahdi Militia members, carrying AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), assembled around Sadr's house. Militiamen blocked all roads feeding downtown Najaf's Revolutionary Square, and banners hung there read, "Take Revenge for the Imam Mahdi" and "Yes to Islam, No to Saddam." Sadrists gathered elsewhere, in the city's Al-Judodah Quarter, anticipating another demonstration to continue towards the Old City and Sistani's home. Local staff reported that shaykhs from the Bani Hassan and Al-Ghazali tribes met at Sadr's house with Sahib Al-Ameeri, the director of Shaheed Allah, an organization affiliated with Sadr. Local staff heard unconfirmed reports of a grenade attack directed at a house near Sadr's that wounded two bystanders.

TWO PROTESTS ROIL KARBALA; SADRISTS, SARKHIS BLAME U.S.

15. (SBU) Exhorted by announcements from the twin shrines of Imams Hussein and Abbas and other mosques, protesters gathered after midday prayers on February 22 in downtown Karbala. Contacts variously reported "800 to 1,000," and "thousands" of demonstrators, including students, government employees and police. Mahdi Militia members also joined the demonstration. Governor Aqeel Al-Khaz'ali declared a three-day mourning period and the closure of all shops and government offices. Karbala Deputy Provincial Council (PC) Chairman Abdul Al Ali Yasseen related that protestors chanted that the bombing was the result of collaboration between U.S. forces and terrorists. Some reportedly called for jihad and revenge. Both the Governor and the PC Chairman, Shaykh Aqeel Fahim Hussein, spoke at the protest. The Governor reportedly counseled self-discipline and warned protestors that the bombing was meant to foment a civil war. Deputy PC Chairman Yasseen said that political leaders and clerics were able to maintain calm. IP Chief Colonel Razzak Abed Ali said that the police monitored the protest, maintained the peace and were heavily deployed throughout the city. The U.S. military reported that Sadrists threw rocks at American Humvees parked outside the Karbala Governorate Center.

HILLAH 00000026 002.2 OF 003

16. (SBU) A second protest, larger than the first, began around 4 p.m. between the Hussein and Abbas Shrines, and lasted for about an hour and a half, local contacts reported. The Governor, IP Chief, and several PC members were present. Mahdi militia members and followers of radical Shi'a cleric Mahmoud Al-Hassani Al-Sarkhy joined the protest in large numbers, chanting "No, no, America." Protestors carried banners reading, "We all sacrifice ourselves for our Imams," and "Let us get our Prophet's revenge." Local staff reported that Sadrists and Sarkhis blamed the attack on the U.S. and "Zionists" hoping to ignite a civil war. Rumors also offered that U.S. forces shelled the shrine, reasoning that Sunnis have lived near the mosque for hundreds of years, and if they had intended to attack the shrine they would have already done so.

17. (SBU) What is reportedly Karbala's only Sunni mosque was attacked by protestors, although accounts conflicted about the nature and extent of the attack. IP sources reported that demonstrators attacked the mosque but were turned away by an IP SWAT team. Another contact related that the Governor went to the mosque to help secure it. A third account, likely the most accurate, maintained that a group of angry young men broke into the mosque, and broke doors, windows and furniture before being stopped by neighboring shopkeepers.

MASSIVE PROTESTS, ONE KILLING, CONCERN BABIL OFFICIALS

18. (SBU) Demonstrators from across Babil travelled to Al-Hillah throughout the day February 22 for a protest that lasted until late afternoon, local contacts and Babil officials related. Mosque loudspeakers announced the protest, and Iraqi Police and demonstrators both blocked major streets leading into the city, police contacts said. Some protestors reportedly chanted, "Down, down, Israel." One local contact reported seeing armed Sadrists

among the throng. Babil PC Chairman Mohammed Ali Masoudi said that he was concerned about the province's ability to maintain order, but that things were "so far under control" as of mid-afternoon. He said that PC members had been calling representatives of the Shi'a religious parties, urging calm and seeking assurances that their members would not attack Sunni mosques. Masoudi also reported rumors that Sadrists were forming groups to travel to Samarra.

¶9. (SBU) Police officials, concerned about the safety of Sunni mosques in Al-Hillah, detailed police and SWAT teams to protect them. Babil Deputy Police Chief Colonel Abbas Al-Jobory reported that two police pick-up trucks and ten SWAT team members had taken positions guarding each Sunni mosque. IP Chief General Qais Hamza Aboud Al-Mahmori reported that he would personally lead patrols around the Sunni areas of Al-Hillah, both to protect the Sunni areas and, he said, to be on guard against possible attacks by Sunnis against the demonstrators. In the evening of February 22, local contacts reported that two armed men went to the home of a Sunni ex-Baathist in Al-Hillah and shot and killed the man.

ONE REPORTED DEATH, DRIVE-BY ATTACKS IN DIWANIYAH PROTESTS

¶10. (SBU) Crowds estimated by some local observers to number into the tens of thousands surged through downtown Diwaniyah beginning at midday and lasting late into the afternoon. Diwaniyah Governor Khalil Jalil Hamza Al-Hamdawi called the REO just before noon and advised REO staff to cancel a planned visit to the Governorate Center that day, explaining that it could "exacerbate the situation." (Note: The Governor volunteered to visit the REO instead, when he had a chance. End note.) In an interview, a Sadrist official told a Diwaniyah journalist that U.S. Ambassador Khalilzad, Baathists, and takfiris had arranged the attack. A local contact reported that an angry mob killed one Sunni and injured another, and that there were RPG attacks against individuals in Sunni neighborhoods. An IP source confirmed the RPG attacks and blamed the Mahdi Militia. (Note: The killing has not been independently confirmed, although the source e-mailed photos of a mob containing armed Sadrists beating a man as a policeman and an Iraqi soldier stood by. End note.)

¶11. (SBU) Demonstrators closed most of the roads leading into the city, a local contact reported. Mosque loudspeakers blared throughout the demonstration and protesters chanted "No, no, no to America. No, no, no to terrorism. No, no, no to transgressions." Sadrists and Sarkhis reportedly made up a large contingent of the protest, and carried banners that read, "We deny this cowardly act which was carried out by the atheists, who are led by the Occupation Forces." Women and children joined the protest, a contact related. An IP source reported that police had spread out around the demonstration and across the city to maintain peace and prevent attacks against Sunnis.

HILLAH 00000026 003.2 OF 003

SHI'A PARTIES LEAD PROTESTS IN WASIT, WATCHED BY ARMY, IP

¶12. (SBU) By midday, thousands of demonstrators had begun marching from the Provincial Council (PC) building to the Governorate Center complex (GC) in Al-Kut, local staff reported. Iraqi Army (IA) and police provided security along the route. Protesters carried banners reading, "Death for the Wahabbis," "Death for the Infidels," and "Death for Saddam and his Comrades." A Wasit journalist related that mosques called for political parties to gather at the GC, and that the mosque announcements blamed the U.S. and Israel for the Al-Askariyah bombing.

¶13. (SBU) Ahmed Al-Hakim, Wasit SCIRI Head, said that he had told SCIRI members to prepare for protests all day and the next day, February 23. He said that he had instructed both SCIRI and

Badr Organization members to follow Sistani's instructions not to assault Sunni mosques, but offered that he could not predict whether Sadrists would follow these instructions. Wasit Sistani Representative Habib Al-Khatib related that he had addressed a second demonstration, also reportedly numbering in the thousands, in Al-Numaniyah, outside Kut. He said that he offered the crowd Sistani's condolences, and admonished them to follow the instructions of the Marja'iyah to demonstrate peacefully and not harm Sunni mosques.

¶14. (SBU) General Mohammed Jawad, the commander of the Second Battalion, Eighth Division of the IA, reported that he had deployed his troops in Kut and outside the city to secure buildings and property. He said that the IA was cooperating with the IP on securing Sunni mosques in Kut. Qasim Al-Arijay, Wasit Badr Organization Deputy and the chairman of the PC security committee, said that he had worked to coordinate police and army protection of Sunni shrines. He added that he was told by Badr headquarters to place the Wasit Badr Organization "on alert." He predicted that Sadrists would soon begin to attack Sunni mosques across the province.

¶15. (SBU) Comment: Given the massive size of demonstrations across the region, and the apparent depth of Shi'a anger, early reports of two killings and a small number of beatings and ransackings shows considerable restraint. The actions of Iraqi Police and Iraqi Army to monitor the demonstrations and protect Sunni areas may indicate a maturation amongst the Iraqi security services. That Mahdi Militia members were reportedly responsible for some of the violence and much of the extreme rhetoric, however, reveals that Iraqi security forces remain unwilling or unable to effectively contain this group. Increasingly fervent and widespread demonstrations are likely to continue region-wide after Friday prayers on February 24. End comment.
FONTENEAU